

THE VIOL DA GAMBA

Instruments – Playing technique – Repertoire



Bass-viol da gamba, cat. no. 4653
© MIM, photo: Anne-Katrin Breitenborn

The viol or viola da gamba is not an instrument for a particular register, although the bass instrument is usually what is meant when discussing it. This is comparable with the range of the cello. However, viols were built from the soprano register all the way through to various mid-ranges down to the contrabass. The instruments of the outer registers have special names: *dessus* or *pardessus de viol* for the soprano instrument, *violone* for the contrabass instrument.

Since the gamba disappeared from the music world at a time when there were no tendencies of unification shaping the musical instruments, »classical type« viols only share a few common features:

1. The upper body end comes to a point up to the neck and usually the mostly flat bottom bent there at the point.
2. All viols have between five and seven strings.
3. The strings have fourth-third tones with fourths between the outer strings and a major third between the two middle. Although there were about fifty different attunements, the following can be referred as the standard tunings:

Double bass	G ¹ C F A d g
Bass	(A) D G c e a d ¹
Alto/tenor	G c f a d ¹ g ¹
Treble (<i>dessus</i>)	d g c ¹ e ¹ a ¹ d ²
<i>Pardessus de viole</i> (5-string)	g c ¹ e ¹ a ¹ d ²
<i>Pardessus de viole</i> (6-string)	g d ¹ a ¹ d ² g ²

4. There are seven gut frets on the fingerboard arranged in semitones.

5. As the instrument (except for the violone) is played between the legs while seated, it has high ribs.

Additional characteristics that are not necessarily commonly found on all instruments are mentioned in connection with each instrument.

The oldest viols

Like many other instruments, the origin of the viol cannot quite be accurately determined. The typical playing position for the instrument is between the legs and appears as early as in medieval illustrations. However, only instruments from the late 15th century survive today. The earliest viol in our collection (cat. no. 2476) is about 400 years old and according to recent research can be attributed to the Flemish area – provided it is genuine. However, it appears to be a French fake from the 19th century. (In the literature it has been long recognized as a North Italian work.) You can play as an alto as well as a tenor instrument. As with so many string instruments neck and accessories (*tailpiece*, *fingerboard*, *vertebrae*, etc.) are from a later time. Upon closer examination, the traces of a former additional tuning peg hole can be seen in the intricately carved peg box, just below the grotesque head of a man. It's questionable whether the head is original. Particularly striking are the pointed pulled out corners, because viols usually bluntly converge with one another, in contrast to the instruments of the violin family. The teardrop-shaped lower bout (that is, the outline of the lower body part) with the disproportionate lower body width is very pronounced.

Master instruments

The Musikinstrumenten-Museum (Museum of Musical Instruments) has some very characteristic and beautiful viols from famous instrument makers.

Barak Norman was one of the most appreciated makers of viols and cellos of the old English school. Norman worked between 1700 and 1740 in London. His bass viol (cat. no. 168) from 1697 has particularly impressively wrought inlaid belly and back; the centre ornament on the back consists of the intertwined initials of the



instrument maker. Fingerboard and tailpiece, both rich with inlays, come from a larger, possibly more recent English Instrument: an example of how little instruments were considered to be unchangeable treasures. Instead, during their musical lifetime they changed them according to current musical needs.

The Hamburg »sound maker« Joachim Tielke (1641–1719) was a well-known and respected instrument maker in his time who worked with almost all types of plucked and string instruments at the time. Many of his instruments are very magnificently decorated. Intricate inlays of ivory, mother of pearl, ebony, and other precious materials show that Tielke's clients were often wealthy aristocrats.

The large bass viol (cat. no. 4654, Tielke WV46) with the curly outline may have originally been a seven-string. Tielke applied symmetrically inlaid, stylized tendrils ornaments made of maple on the back, as we know from other viols from his workshop. Compare the lion head not originating from Tielke with the original of his smaller viol (cat. no. 4077, Tielke WV92): The qualitative difference between the two carvings is striking. The small bass viol has the »classic« outline form, but notwithstanding the f-holes, as viols normally have C or flamed sound holes. Both instruments have not bent, but a curved back, a characteristic of many of Tielke's viols.

Not much more is known about Gregorius Karpp than that he was in Königsberg in 1700. The two viols that the Museum has of his have a carved lion's head, which



Bass-viol, cat. no.168 © MIM, photo: Knud Peter Petersen

is quite characteristic for Karpp. Equally unconventional are the sinuous sound openings ending in two merging points down on the two instruments. The backs and ribs are made of vivid iridescent flamed birch.

The bass viol (cat. no. 4653) has a contra-A as a seventh string, and goes a fourth deeper than a regular six-stringed instrument. The smaller viol has an intermediate size, which can be assigned to both the alto as well as the tenor range. The five-stringed instrument (cat. no. 4521) is a fine example of the diversity of types of viols.

Fashion instruments at the French Court

A special type of treble viol was very popular in the 18th century among French amateurs, especially ladies: The pardessus de viol. It lacks the lower string, and thus corresponds to the range of the violin. Not without reason, because little violin compositions on the instrument were also played, as well as solo literature that was written specifically for it.

Two pardessus de viol from our collection were made by Louis Guersan (cat. no. 4520, dated 1754, and cat. no. 4478, dated 1766). Guersan was a highly respected Parisian guild master and in the last generation of viol makers.

On playing technique

Why do the viols differ from the instruments of the violin family? There are socially-related reasons: The social aura of the viol was different from that of the violin, viols were counted among the instruments of the higher strata of society, whereas violins were still dance instruments in the 17th century. Therefore, valuable decorated viols are much more common than decoratively crafted violins. But there are sound reasons for the differences in design between the two instrument families, although they seem so similar at first glance. The important, phonetic differences concern the interrelationship between the instrument and the playing technique, i.e. the requirements imposed by the musicians on his instrument to produce a certain sound. The way of playing a viol is different from that of playing the violin or cello.

The frets and the relatively flat rounded, wide fingerboard allow for a chord-paced playing; at the same time, they achieve a tonal effect that is impossible for instruments characteristic of the violin family: portamento (continuous gliding over from one note to another). A permanent vibrato is nearly impossible, because the frets hamper the periodic swing of the left fingers quite a bit. (But such modern acoustic color values were also not sought after.) Vibrato was played as a flourish on a few individual notes, and in different ways at that.

The viol bow is lighter than the cello bow. Its head is typically low and long and comes to a point. The bow is held from underneath, as shown in the period illustration on the title page. Pizzicato was also a popular way of playing the viol (the strings were plucked with

the fingers of the right hand, instead of with a bow) – certainly a relic from the early days of the instrument. Solo viol music was notated in two ways: in the familiar to us (mensural) notation and tablature. Tablature is a fingering notation that indicates which fret on which string is to be tapped. This type of notation is advantageous for the musician playing on different instruments and in different tunes (or »detunings« as people used to say). Otherwise, the player would have to visualize exactly in what tune his instrument is in every time. The close relationship between playing technique and the instrument led to the tools repeatedly being rebuilt to reflect new playing techniques. An example of this is the bass viol of Jacobus Stainer, the famous Tyrolean violin maker from the village of Absam near Innsbruck. His instrument (cat. no. 244) had a neck with a narrow fingerboard, as was common with the cello, and a cherub's head, when Joseph Joachim, the eminent violinist and director of the Royal Academy of Music in Berlin, passed it on to the Museum in 1888. Neither the head nor fingerboard with neck are original because the fingerboard is too narrow to comfortably reach six strings, and the head can be classified from an art historical point of view as coming from the 19th century. The instrument must therefore undoubtedly have been rebuilt in the 19th century to be played like a cello – such hybrid instrument conversions were once referred to as a »cellamba« by the English musicologist Thurston Dart. In 1981/82 a new neck with fret board and headstock was historically modeled on another Stainer viol and thus returned to the instrument to a possibly original condition.

A chamber music instrument

A diverse repertoire of music was played on the viol, but it was largely limited to the area of chamber music. Consort music, polyphonic compositions for several viols in various registers, was popular in England, but also broken consort, which is usually six-part mixed ensemble. Fantasias by Henry Purcell (1659–1695) came from English consort music. The viol was also played solo.

In the 17th century in France a unique style of viol developed, which was represented by composers like Marin Marais (1656–1728) and Antoine Forqueray (circa 1672–1745): the *pièces de viole*. These are usually written for a seven-string viol and continuo and some have programmatic titles like Marais' »Le tableau de l'opération de la taille.«

Highlights of chamber music are Bach's sonatas for viol and harpsichord (BWV 1027/29), which are also played by cellists.

The bass viol was also used as a continuo instrument, just as the violone was actually used only as an instrument to play the bass line with the octave offset.

That the viol lost appreciation as quickly as in the mid-18th century, was due to the musical and social sound upheaval: As an orchestral instrument, the viol was



Viol, coloured copper engraving, Johann Christoph Weigel, 1710, Inv.-Nr. Lipp Pg 3 © Kunstbibliothek SMB, photo: Dietmar Katz

unsuitable because of its nasal tone and stood in opposition to the clear melodic lines, as an instrument for chamber music, it lacked a modern repertoire – music was then being written for string quartets instead of consort music. So many viols were rebuilt into cellos. Only in the 20th century did musicians like Arnold Dolmetsch, Christian Döbereiner and Paul Grümmer bring the viol back into concert life again after isolated attempts i. a. Paul de Wit, upon whose collection of instruments the Berlin Musikinstrumenten-Museum of our institute was based as early as the late 19th century.

Opinions of the viol

»Without a doubt, in the hands of an excellent viol player, the viol may be counted among the best musical instruments.«

(Christopher Simpson, *The division viol*, London 1659)

»The bass viol is a particularly noble instrument that also has all the advantages of the violin.«

(Roger North, *The noble bass viol*, 1710)

»The viol, or leg viol, is one of the most delicate instruments when played well. Those who want play it have to have swift fists and long fingers, and at the same time be able to move them carefully, as I have all too often heard even masters do on this beloved instrument.«

(Philipp Eisel, *Musicus autodidactus*, Erfurt 1738)

»The sounds of the viol are so fundamentally cruel and nasal that only the highest degree of skill and refinement they can make bearable. A human voice of the same quality would unbearable.«

(Charles Burney, *A general history of music*, vol. 4, London 1789)

»The viol ... is of exceptional grace. The night pieces can be delightfully played upon it; it breathes above all grace and tenderness.« (Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubarth, *Ideen zu einer Ästhetik der Tonkunst*, Vienna 1806)



Treble viol, J. Würffel, Greifswald, before 1700, cat. no. 541
© MIM, photo: Jürgen Liepe

»And yet the tones of the viol are wiry, thin, and scratchy, so that even the art [of a master on this instrument] could only possibly be pleasurable to one's own ears.«

(Thomas Busby, *Concert room and orchestra anecdotes*, vol. 1, London 1825)

Detailed descriptions of the instruments can be found in the *Katalog der Streichinstrumente* by Irmgard Otto and Olga Adelman (Berlin 1975).

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